MORE SURPRISES TO COME!
John 20:1-18
April 26, 1981

Barbara D. Beavers
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The Sunday after Easter, the great church holiday, we need to pause and ask ourselves, so what? After the lilies have faded, the chocolate bunnies are eaten, and the new clothes are no longer new, we need pause and ask, what was it all about anyway?

Biblical writers say it was about everything. Christ has risen in some deep mysterious way...and so nothing is quite the same. And the bottom line is that we, like the earliest Christians, reap the benefits; we have a chance for a new, deeper life.

Mary Magdalene's story tells us that. When all is said and done - when all the deceit, betrayal, and anger of human beings has done its worst; when judgement and death have exposed the pain of hell -- beyond the cross, the tomb is empty - it has no power.

That Good News, so basic to life, is hard for us to learn and harder still to remember. There is so much in life that keeps us geared for the bad news, The headlines both report and anticipate the bad news. But in God's wisdom we have been created so that in spite of all the bad news, we are made with a receptivity to newness of life that gives us hope in the future.

Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus in the garden expresses the power of a living God and points to three truths I would like to highlight.

First is the surprising way in which Jesus reveals himself. Take Mary Magdalene. It is helpful to begin with who Mary Magdalene is not. She was not Mary, the mother of Jesus. She was not the mother of James. She was not the woman in Luke who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and to whom he pronounced, "Your sins are forgiven". And despite traditional efforts to slander her as a prostitute, there is no Biblical evidence for the gossip.

That Jesus chose this very ordinary woman, from the lowest order of society is quite surprising. For she was a poor, single woman. In our day, she wouldn't qualify for a Master Card or membership in the local private club. And yet she was someone who had been touched by this Christ and whose life was changed.

When Jesus was on the road with His followers, He had a group of women with Him, from whom He'd cast out evil spirits. They had not only joined up with Him but had helped pay His expenses. One of them was Mary Magdalene, and in her case it was apparently not just one evil spirit that had been cast out, but seven. We do not know what her problem was, but it was apparently serious and recurrent.

In any case, she seems to have teamed up with Jesus early in the game and stuck with Him to the end. And beyond. She who was given a new life was devoted to Jesus. Her devotion was practical - it was not an empty spiritual "high". She participated in itinerate mssions in Galilee, contributed financially, went with Jesus and His followers to Jerusalem, was present at the crucifixion, came to the tomb to anoint Jesus, reported the empty tomb - and then the appearance of the risen Christ!

tell God Almighty about West Virginia." Mother Jones was a disciple of Jesus Christ. Her life was one of telling others the news in concrete ways. (Women of Courage, Margaret Truman, p.85).

In our time, we naturally look to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Her life is the manifestation of a person touched by Christ. Her work is her gift to the world. To those of us who wish to believe "there's nothing we can do anyway", we belittle her efforts. The news of the starving and dying is hard for us to hear. We think, perhaps, "What good is she doing in the long run?" Yet she has seen the cross and has held steadfast. Her presence in the world does indeed change people.

Groups as well as individuals witness to the cross and new life in Jesus Christ. I would like to suggest that the Polish people are presently witnesses in this way. We need remember that this country is heavily Roman Catholic. In recent years, the Catholic church has exercised its beliefs in newness and resurrection and has undergone dramatic change- painful change. This is surely a fundamental part of the Polish situation. Lech Walesa, the Solidarity leader is a devout Catholic. His work is a part of his faith. Jesus Christ has touched the lives of these people in deep ways and has provided them a sense of the freedom possible with the risen Christ. It appears we have much to learn from them. For they are working toward peaceful change, the kind of freeing change Jesus Christ bet His life upon. It appears to be different from our seeming confrontative dare to the Russians: Will you back down or will you slaughter the Poles? Do we know any solution other than a new supply of weapons? From the Poles we can see the actions of the Solidarity Movement as a refreshing spirit of freedom, of liberty from the people. Working peacefully together, a society has been transformed at the molecular level. The government, in turn, has responded carefully and with respect.

A recent New Yorker magazine editorial describes the situation in this way:

"And by their restraint, the members of Solidarity have added a hopeful new chapter to the story of nonviolence, for this is the first time that this mode has been used to telling effect against a totalitarian adversary. Solidarities' means and ends have been one. Its members have fought for tolerance by being tolerant; they have fought for the truth by telling the truth; and they have gained freedom by practicing freedom." (New Yorker, April 19, 1981).

The bad news is present. But the good news does break through and reminds us of the new possibilities in life. Jesus comes as a surprise, in the garden, in the hills of West Virginia, in the slums of Calcutta, in the Polish towns. His coming is a charge to go and tell others. And in so doing, the good news becomes real to others.

This is our task. It is as easy as holding the dying, organizing the laborers, facing the Russian tanks, and following our Lord with His cross. "Do not hold onto me, but go and tell". There are more surprises to come!

Almighty God - surprise us with joy. Challenge us to see what is needed in the world around us, that our faith might lead us where we would not choose to go.

Amen.